

September '24

ABHIVYAKTI

CHINHARI FOUNDATION



Introduction

Aditi

Whenever I have asked my daughters what have been some of the most memorable moments of their kindergarten years, they have always mentioned art lessons with leaves and flowers, growing seeds, pretending to be the different forms of transportations that they know about and friends. (One important aspect of Early Childhood learning is 'pretend play'. Children are given opportunities and time to explore being anything that they want to be. It could be inanimate objects as well. Pretend Play helps and aids to foster creative thinking, cognitive development and social emotional competencies). Their responses and the responses that I have observed from my teaching years have only helped to reinforce and reconfirm my belief in experiential learning-opportunities for children and the joy of collective and cooperative efforts. My focus group has always been preschoolers and even among them these elements of building, learning, exploring the world through lived experience has been paramount. It was during the pandemic that I met this group of young women who symbolised and represented the spirit of **Chinhari**. I met them twice. I was mesmerised by their ideas, their clarity of thought and most importantly, their belief in themselves. They were different. Last year I got the opportunity to interact with this group of young women again. In an English language class. Where we co-learnt.

We started the English class with the idea of learning the language through the "use" of English expressions in everyday village life. We were learning English in a rural forest community context. The content and the process of learning was getting transformed in the process. It was, however, not a space to just learn English. But to know each other a little better. It was a space to form connections. Build togetherness.

It was a space to learn to respect indigenous and Dalit life worlds. It was also a space to study in the English language questions of women's lived experiences. Read stories of indigenous and Dalit women. Translate into English the ideas, dreams and feelings of Chinhari associates.



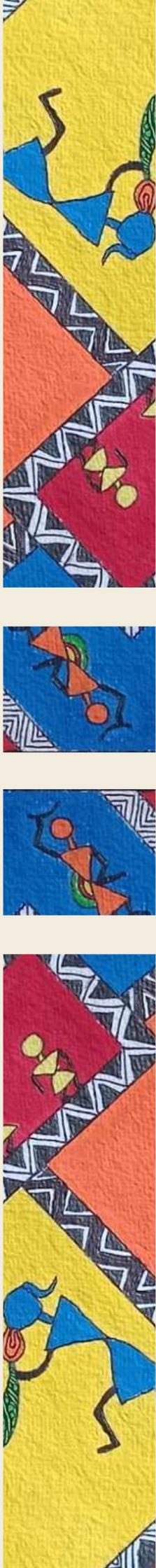
The classes in the English language became more than what it was planned out to be. It became a space for engaging with the language of young women; and with the foreign-ness of a language we were all learning. I was hearing their stories, discovering their worldviews, learning from them and trying to be a part of the interconnectedness that binds us all. We were not just learning the relationship between words. We were building relationships among ourselves. We were not just learning grammar. We were learning the grammar of life.

As we worked through 2023 and well into 2024, the idea of setting up a space for mutual learning started to take shape. A space which would be of our own, reflecting our perceptions, nurturing our ideas. Connected with nature, a space where we would try to understand equity in education, think of education in terms of diversity and inclusion, create classrooms without boundaries. I had suggested two reflective questions to the Chinhari associates regarding this. The questions were, which aspect of their own schooling were they unsatisfied about and how they would re-think that in the space we were trying to build. Their responses of the problems just about covered the entire spectrum of possible areas of difficulties. Their responses on the promises gave a glimpse of the many possibilities that we could have.

It was also a reflection of their imagination, comprehension of the context and clarity of their ideas.

Some of the thoughts shared are put together. The ideas are theirs. I have humbly attempted to give a shape (not a voice) to them.





Collective Reflection of the Chinhari Associates:

Kavita · Lalita · Keshbati · Renuka

Thanesh · Yogita · Hema

1

Schools in the village are still not divided into separate classrooms.

2

Classes are still held within four walls. Walls with small windows from where we can't see the outside world. We only look at books and learn from books.

The books are our only connection to the world.

3

Our Chinhari school should be outside. In nature and with nature. The activities should be alongside the trees, water, forest, insects and flowers. There will be no walls. Everyone will sit together.





4

In our school, we were taught lessons out of the books. We did not get to understand much. Teachers would just read out the topic. They would open the book and read out the content from the books. They did not really explain or let us explore the many things we were learning about. Therefore, we would forget most of it most of the time.

5



We did have an Eco Club in the school to create environmental awareness. These clubs bring up some topics and activities at times. However, they rarely discussed the importance and need to learn about nature in detail. They did not introduce or share about the climate, how it is affecting the farmers, us. We were unaware of the dangers of climate change and environmental destruction.

6

During our school years we have asked very few questions.



Almost none. In the schools we did not have the environment to ask questions. There were always too many students, and we would always agree with the teacher. Many a time the teacher would not let us question or she would scold us. We did not learn how to question.



7

The schools where we went, where we studied always focused on subjects and topics that were far away from us. This would encourage students to look for work outside in the cities. They did not have any idea or knowledge about their own land and forest. They would most often look down on our agricultural work. They would respect work in the cities; mostly work in the corporate sector.



8

The schools develop bookish knowledge and focus on topics that are very limited. There is discrimination based on gender and caste. The children go to school just to pass and graduate and then get a job. It is not geared towards overall development.



9

The syllabus is the same in all our schools. Not many activities are conducted in the school by the teachers. Quality of education is weak. There is no practical education. There is no emphasis on financial education or on livelihoods training. The children who are weak, they are often left behind. With the huge load of syllabus and few teachers, the academically weak students are not attended to.





In our Chinhari school, we would like to engage the students in activities that are related to their everyday lives. We would like to take them to the 'baari/badi' to teach them about plants and vegetables. We would want them to explore and build their understanding from things around them in their respective villages. Once they see the objects around them and the life forms around them they will ask questions and they will remember. In our Chinhari school, we would like to create a space to learn from nature and be with nature. We would like to share how important it is for us to be connected to nature. Today, students are mostly taken away from nature. Into the four walls. They are hence more interested in mobile phones, games and online sites. This is harmful for them, for us, for everyone. We want to talk about this in our school. Talk and bring in the change from an early age. We would like to teach about climate, weather change and how it affects us, the farmers and the communities that grow their own food. In our school, we would like to encourage the student to ask questions. Ask questions about everything. Anything that interests them. We will do the homework so that we are able to answer their questions. If there is something we don't know, we will admit that and will read about it and come back to class to learn together. In our Chinhari school we would like to create a model of work where we are able to put this into practice. Where we would teach about farming, forest life and offer opportunities to the student to put their understanding of nature, farming and forest gathering into practice. In our school, we would encourage students to learn more about the forest, about kinds of land and the rural world. We would also like to work on questions of gender and menstruation and issues of girls and young women. We would like to work with their mothers on these issues as well. In our school we would not like to have discrimination on any grounds. In our school both girls and boys will be taught about menstrual health. There will be no division among girls and boys in terms of what should be learnt. We will not keep the boys unaware about menstrual health and other kinds of sensitive topics. Both boys and girls will learn about the different aspects of their body and about health. We can use computers to help us in this. activity. In our school, we would like to focus on the **process of learning**, ability and **capacity building** and **learning to learn from life and the environment around**, We would also like to start work on unique learning areas like **self-awareness** and **self-development**. We would also learn about **livelihoods** and **finance**. We thus want to create a space for learning and cross learning for both teachers and students. We will learn from each other.



Excerpted from: V. Bhatia (ed.) 1994. Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education. New Delhi: Sahitya Chayan.

"The Parrot's Training"

Rabindranath Tagore

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS a bird It was ignorant. It sang all right, but never recited scriptures. It hopped pretty frequently, but lacked manners.

Said the Raja to himself: 'Ignorance is costly in the long run. For fools consume as much food as their betters, and yet give nothing in return.'

He called his nephews to his presence and told them that the bird must have a sound schooling.

The pundits were summoned, and at once went to the root of the matter. They decided that the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the pundits, the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage.

The pundits had their rewards and went home happy.

A golden cage was built with gorgeous decorations. Crowds came to see it from all parts of the world. 'Culture, captured and caged!' exclaimed some, in a rapture of ecstasy, and burst into tears. Others remarked: 'Even if culture be missed, the cage will remain, to the end, a substantial fact. How fortunate for the bird!'

The goldsmith filled his bag with money and lost no tune in sailing homewards.

The pundit sat down to educate the bird. With proper deliberation he took his pinch of snuff: as he said: 'Textbooks can never be too many for our purpose!'

The nephews brought together an enormous crowd of scribes. They copied from books, and copied from copies, till the manuscripts were piled up to an unreachable height. Men murmured in amazement. 'Oh, the tower of culture, egregiously high! The end of it lost in the clouds!'

The scribes, with light hearts, hurried home, their pockets heavily laden.

The nephews were furiously busy keeping the cage in proper trim. As their constant scrubbing and polishing went on, the people said with

satisfaction: 'This is progress indeed!'

Men were employed in large numbers and supervisors were still more numerous. These, with their cousins of all different degrees of distance, built a palace for themselves and lived there happily ever after.

Whatever may be its other deficiencies, the world is never in want of fault-finders; and they went about saying *that* every creature remotely connected with the cage flourished beyond words, excepting only the bird.

When this remark reached the Raja's ears, he summoned his nephews before him and said: 'My dear nephews, what is this *that* we hear?'

The nephews said in answer: 'Sire, let the testimony of the goldsmiths and the pundits, the scribes and the supervisors be taken, if the truth is to be known. Food is scarce with the fault-finders, and that is why their tongues have gained in sharpness.'

The explanation was so luminously satisfactory that the Raja decorated each one of his nephews with *his* own rare jewels.

The Raja at length, being desirous of seeing with his own eyes how his Education Department busied itself with the little bird, made his appearance one day at the great Hall of Learning.

From the gate rose the sounds of conch-shells and gongs, horns, bugles and trumpets, cymbals, drums and kettledrums, tomtoms, tambourines, flutes, fifes, barrel-organs and bagpipes. The pundits began chanting mantras with their topmost voices, while the goldsmiths, scribes, supervisors, and their numberless cousins of all different degrees of distance, loudly raised a round of cheers.

The nephews smiled and said: 'Sire, what do you think of it all?'

The Raja said: 'It does seem so fearfully like a sound principle of Education!'

Mightily pleased, the Raja was about to remount his elephant, when the fault-finder, from behind

some bush, cried out: 'Maharaja, have you seen the bird?'

'Indeed, I have not!' exclaimed the Raja. 'I completely forgot about the bird.'

Turning back, he asked the pundits about the method they followed in instructing the bird. It was shown to him. He was immensely impressed. The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison. The Raja was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper. It sent a thrill through one's body to watch the process.

This time, while remounting his elephant, the Raja ordered his State ear-puller to give a thorough good pull at both the ears of the fault-finder.

The bird thus crawled on, duly and properly, to the safest verge of inanity. In fact, its progress was satisfactory in the extreme. Nevertheless, Nature occasionally triumphed over training, and when the morning light peeped into the bird's cage it sometimes fluttered its wings in a reprehensible manner. And, though it is hard to believe, *it* pitifully pecked at its bars with its feeble beak.

'What impertinence!' growled the kotwal.

The blacksmith, with his forge and hammer, took his place in the Raja's Department of Education. Oh, what resounding blows! The iron chain was soon completed, and the bird's wings were clipped.

The Raja's brothers-in-law looked black, and shook their heads, saying: 'These birds not only lack good sense, but also gratitude!'

With text-book in one hand and baton in the other, the pundits gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!

The kotwal was honoured with a title for his watchfulness, and the blacksmith for his skill in forging chains.

The bird died.

Nobody had the least notion how long ago this had happened. The fault-finder was the first man to spread the rumour.

The Raja called his nephews and asked them, 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?'

The nephews said: 'Sire, the bird's education has been completed.'

'Does it hop?' the Raja enquired.

'Never!' said the nephews.

'Does it fly?'

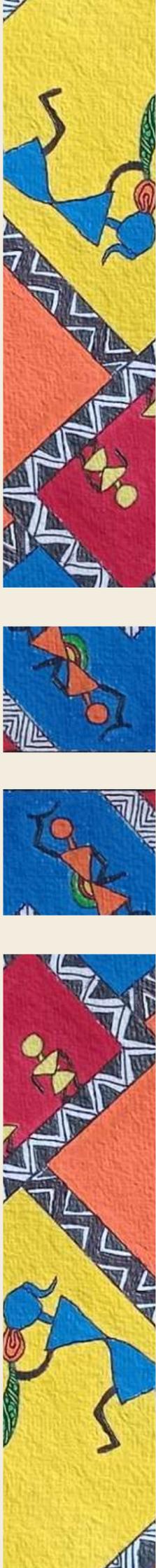
'No.'

'Bring me the bird,' said the Raja.

The bird was brought to him, guarded by the kotwal and the sepoy and the sowars. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.

Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded asoka leaves made the April morning wistful.





Reflections on 'The Parrot's Training'

A reading of 'The Parrot's Training' by Rabindranath Tagore enabled us to look again at 'school'-s and especially mainstream schools that has been a part of our lives, all our lives. The plight of the caged parrot, caged in a golden cage, surrounded by a pre-determined philosophy of 'educating;' following the strict norms of 'what constitutes learning.' It reflected the plight of students stuck in the labyrinthian maze of 'education'. Reading of this text enabled us to draw several analogies with our present contexts of school and society. Here are some of the facets we thought about, discussed and reflected on.

Kavita: According to the story, the king was more interested in looking at the arrangements of the 'education department'. But he did not see the parrot's condition. In the same way, in our schools, we put a lot of effort in decoration of the building and creating content, which is the curriculum. This is a necessary aspect, but not the only one. Not much attention is paid to the needs of the students and what are they learning. Is the curriculum relevant, is it being delivered in a way that is meaningful? When parents enrol their children in school they only see the external environment of the building and facilities. They do not understand the impact of the school, the teaching process on the children.

Thanesh: The parrot was kept in the cage with bars. There was little interaction with the outside world. It was not able to fly, it was not able to whistle and not allowed to hop. Till its last day, the parrot tried to 'break the bars' of his cage. Its 'poor nest' was replaced by a 'golden cage with gorgeous decoration.' Similarly, students are kept in the well-constructed buildings, well equipped spaces (most of the time). Sometimes, they act like cages with no escape. They have little opportunity to interact and learn from the outside world. Learning from the community has been replaced with learning from institutions.



Renuka: In the story, the king decided on what is 'knowledge' and 'learning' for the parrot. The king did not ask the parrot what she wants to learn. He did not consider the fact that the parrot might want to 'learn' something else. He also did not consider what the parrot could do. In schools, teachers are focussed on completing the content. They seldom ask the students what they would want to learn. Students often suggest interesting topics which can then be expanded to a whole new learning experience. Students in a class are different with varied interests and aptitude. One syllabus for everyone does not meet the needs of all the students.

Hema: We will use activities and other methods to teach concepts. Not just through books. If the parrot was not kept in the cage, was set free, was allowed to fly, then perhaps the parrot would have learnt from the environment. It would perhaps not have died. The people would have understood the parrot and the parrot would have understood the people. If people understood the parrot (and the woman) and if the teacher understood the student, they all would have soared in the sky and not be there with broken wings.



Tomesh: Like the king in the story, teachers and people in authority have the same perspective of knowing it all. In schools we see the same thing with teachers and students. Whatever the teacher thinks is almost always considered to be 'correct' and is taught. The questions of the students are ignored and left un-answered. The sense of superiority of knowledge, its understanding and application lies with the men and not with women.



Yogita: As the parrot was kept in the cage and made to learn, similarly in school students are confined within the classroom and women within the confines of her home and family. If they are all kept outside the cages, students would learn differently, women would learn to be themselves and they all would be better equipped to learn what they want to learn. They will perhaps have a better understanding to decide what is 'good' for them and 'how they can achieve it.'



Lalita: The parrot was kept in a cage, that is a fact. Whether the cage is made of gold or something else is irrelevant here. The cage, or the limitations are already set for the bird. How much it can move, what it will learn, how much it will learn, what it should do are all pre-determined by 'others'. Schools and institutions, many a times reflect this idea of education. What has to be learned, when and how are all pre-determined in a watertight manner.

Conclusion

The reflections of the Chinhari associates open up multiple possibilities. Including the possibility of having a dream and realising it together. In a cooperative way.

The possibility of 'learning' that need not happen within the boundaries of school walls. It is also an acknowledgement that there are as many kinds of knowledge and understanding as there are people and communities; that we all - even students - do have a little bit of something which we can share and build on with each other; that when we talk about collective understanding, we are emphasising a kind of 'adding on to' and editing our existing knowledge, and not merely assimilating different kinds of knowledge to the dominant one.

Their reflections not only pertained to 'education' but also raised the gender question. The chains that bind the child in education and the woman in family and society bears uncanny similarity.



Picture Gallery





